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Office of Basic Intelligence

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MEMORANDUM FOR: NIS Contributors

SUBJECT: Writing for the NIS

*The following was prepared by Mr. W. Stewart Lester, Jr., NIS Coordinator in the Office of Research and Analysis for American Republics, Bureau of Intelligence and Research, Department of State, for analysts of that Office producing NIS contributions. These observations, based on extensive experience in production for the NIS, are disseminated to recipients of other NIS Memos as having general applicability to the preparation of NIS contributions.*

## WRITING FOR THE NIS

## A. GENERAL

In the work that we do *writing* is by far the most important means of communication. It is most frequently the means by which we discharge our responsibilities and it is one of the principal bases upon which our effectiveness and usefulness are judged. Our knowledge and understanding of a country may be excellent, we may know well the objectives and operations of its political parties, we may know its banking system and appreciate its balance of payments problems, but if we cannot convey to our readers in an effective manner the knowledge and wisdom that we have, these assets are of little value. In the final analysis we must write well in order to fulfill the obligations that our jobs place upon us.

NIS writing requires basically the qualities that are needed for most report writing. In addition, like most other specialized types of writing, it has a few requirements that are peculiar to itself. Some of these requirements have to do with the organization and style, others are concerned with structural details and format. The good writer—the one who contributes most effectively to NIS production—must be well-acquainted with both the fundamental requirements of good writing and the specialized requirements of NIS, both those of a general nature and those of specific detail.

The good writer—like the good staff worker—will (to the best of his ability) prepare a finished draft. He will not use his branch chief, nor the various reviewers and editors beyond the branch, as crutches to lean upon. His finished draft will require a minimum of alteration. The best written papers are susceptible to improvement through the reading by another well-informed person and by the exchange of ideas and sharpening of one's focus. The editors should be able in such cases to make helpful suggestions for more effective presentation, point out an occasional inconsistency, and correct errors in style

28 SEP 1959

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1

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and format. If extensive editing is required, however, frustration, heartache, time lost, and a record of poor performance are the inevitable consequences.

Many manhours are lost because reports have to be edited in great detail, revised, added to, retyped. Granted that some of this editing is unnecessary or ill-advised, under existing circumstances most of it is necessary. But much of it could be avoided through greater forethought, careful preparation, consultation, checking and rechecking, looking at one's own paper after it is drafted, with a new perspective and an objective eye. The quality of NIS drafts received by reviewing officers varies enormously, far more than can be accounted for by differences in ability. It seems certain, therefore, that an analyst, by concentrating upon the standards of good writing, the basic requirements of NIS, and the special rules that apply to NIS writing, can save himself and others much time and at the same time do a more effective job.

What are the qualities of a well-written report? The more important are few in number, but they are essential. A research report should be:

- 1) accurate in its facts and sound in its interpretations;
- 2) clear and concise in its presentation;
- 3) complete in terms of the stated and known requirements;
- 4) objective.

In addition, an NIS report must conform without much deviation to the organizational requirements laid down in the *National Intelligence Survey Standard Instructions* and established through the precedents of published sections. In style, it must be straight-forward, matter-of-fact, devoid of flourishes. It must avoid extraneous discussion, speculation, and recommendation. It must be a report whose main features can be quickly grasped by a reader unfamiliar with the subject and one which, at the same time, can be used for reference as to detail needed in policy making or operations. (How this two-fold purpose may be accomplished will be indicated below.) The writer must constantly strive to do as much as possible for his potential reader. For example, valid general conclusions, relevant to the subject under discussion, should be stated, not left to the reader to infer or guess.

## B. BASIC REQUIREMENTS OF GOOD WRITING

### 1. Accuracy

It seems almost superfluous to discuss this requirement, yet hasty work and insufficient diligence in digging out the facts, failure to check information from one source against that of another, and failure sometimes to use the most reliable sources frequently do result in error. Accuracy can best be obtained by checking the original source wherever possible. A copy of a constitution, for example, is for most purposes to be preferred to what somebody has written about it, though the latter may be highly useful. Inaccuracies are frequently found in the spelling of names and places (especially in the failure to include accents), but most often occur in statistical data. Frequently, the latter result from careless copying at one stage or another. Checking, rechecking, and proofing are essential to avoid this type of error.

### 2. Clarity and conciseness

a. Clarity—After accuracy the first aim in any report writing is to state facts, describe situations, or convey ideas so that the reader will understand—or to look at it another way—so that the reader cannot misunderstand. Because readers of NIS are presumably busy people, a related aim is to write so that the reader will understand as quickly and easily as possible.

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What can be done to insure clarity?

- 1) Avoid long and complicated sentences.
- 2) Use the simplest language that will adequately convey the thought.
- 3) Be as precise as possible. (This involves not only the choice of the right words and the proper arrangement of them, but implies a clear understanding by the writer himself.)
- 4) Paragraph properly.
  - a) Does each paragraph contain only one main thought?
  - b) Is the thought developed adequately?
  - c) Is the paragraph not too long, not too short?
  - d) Does the paragraph begin with a topic sentence that is a key to the whole paragraph?
- 5) Present facts and ideas in the most effective order. (The organization of a piece of writing as a whole and in its various parts is important to its clarity. Giving the reader at the outset an understanding of what is to follow, constructing paragraphs—see No. 4 above—so that each is a complete thought unit, arranging these paragraphs in logical order, placing important ideas in important positions—all help the reader to get the message clearly and quickly.)
- 6) Organize carefully, meticulously; in broad outline and in great detail. Nothing promotes clarity so much as good organization.

b. Conciseness—An NIS section may be too long, not so much because it covers too much ground but because it includes unnecessary detail, or because it does not state thoughts in the simplest, most succinct possible way. Conciseness must not sacrifice clarity; actually in many cases it will enhance it.

Conciseness may take a little more of the writer's time but it will save time in review, in typing, and in reproduction. Most important, it will save the reader time. Moreover, it may make the difference between a report being read and its not being read.

### 3. Completeness

Obviously, this cannot mean absolutely all that can be written on the subject. What then is meant by completeness? It means that all the known informational requirements are fulfilled with appropriate generalizations and with the right amount of detail. If needed information is not available, and cannot be obtained within a reasonable time, these gaps are noted in the evaluation of sources (and occasionally in the main body of the text). What is the "right" amount of detail? There is no infallible guide. Recently published sections must serve to some degree, but they are not necessarily good models. In the last analysis good judgment based upon experience is the best guide.

Completeness has another aspect. An NIS report is complete when all of its parts have been prepared. Most of these parts are specifically required; others are optional to a degree. A section consists of all its textual parts, its "front matter" (cover page, control page, table of contents, figure list, and caption list), its list of principal sources, its documentation, and any necessary or desirable tables, graphics, maps, and photographs. A report is complete when the right numbers and captions have been put on all these supplemental items and they have been caretted into the text. A complete report in first draft is a rare and wonderful thing to behold!

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3

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## 4. Objectivity

In order to serve its purpose an NIS section, like any other research report, must be devoid of prejudice. The purpose of NIS is to provide policy makers and operational officers with basic information of the greatest possible reliability. The NIS is no place to develop a theory, advocate a policy, or indulge one's emotions. Of course, every writer must constantly exercise judgment as to the reliability of information at hand, its pertinency, and its meaning in a broader perspective. The human mind being what it is, his judgment will be influenced to some degree by his feelings. But it is the job of the analyst to cultivate constantly an objective attitude, and in his writing to question continually whether or not he has permitted his own bias to creep into his selection of material and the generalizations he has made. In addition, he must avoid words which might cause the reader to question his objectivity, and, therefore, discount the value of the report.

To insure objectivity one must ordinarily avoid judgments as to the wisdom of any government action, any party's platform, or any leader's views or conduct. He may analyze an economic policy, but it is not his function (in NIS) to say, even by implication, that it is good or bad. He may suggest, for example, that some policy will or will not tend to perpetuate an unbalanced budget, but whether such an eventuality is good or bad may be a very debatable matter. Similarly, in the sociological field, customs that seem peculiar or lacking in merit may have great value to people in a culture different from ours. Objectivity demands that one refrain from evaluating such a custom, except as he may be able to do so in terms of the traditions, knowledge, opportunities, fears, hopes, and aspirations of the people being discussed.

## C. SPECIAL NIS REQUIREMENTS

## 1. General

It would be impossible to list here, much less discuss, all the many and varied NIS requirements. Most of these have been stated in the *Standard Instructions*, and in various editorial instructions on special problems, most of which, because of their specialized nature, may not have general distribution.

NIS requirements may also be ascertained by the study of completed sections, preferably those that have been published in printed form. One may infer from these sections what is regarded as appropriate interpretation of the requirements set forth in the *Standard Instructions*. Any analyst beginning a new section should profit by the study of one or more of these completed documents, including usually the appropriate section on some country in his own general area, and one on some similar country in another area. This is not to suggest that slavish adherence to previous writings is the road to success, but a study of these documents should suggest the bounds within which one must keep in following the relatively rigid NIS instructions. They may be a stimulus to the imagination, too, in developing more definite ideas as to what the statement of substantive requirements implies, or may reasonably be inferred to mean.

In the interpretation of NIS requirements a number of misconceptions and problems seem to recur with much frequency. The following discussion may be of some value in avoiding the more common pitfalls.

## 2. Special problems

a. The "dual purpose" problem—How can the NIS serve both to give the reader a quick overall view of a situation and at the same time to provide a reference for detailed information? It does this by organization. The completed NIS has a Chapter I (Brief) which summarizes the material of the

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remaining chapters. Each section of this chapter corresponds to one chapter in the series. This is one of the principal ways that the broad perspective is presented along with the detail, but it is available only when any particular NIS approaches completion.

In a somewhat different way the general understanding is provided by the introductory sections (such as 40, 50, and 60) in each chapter. These sections are not so much summaries as introductions, presenting the basic factors and situations needed to give the reader a brief overview of the society, its politics, or its economy and thus enable him to grasp the significance of the details presented in subsequent sections of the chapter.

Then in most chapters each section begins with an "A. General" which does much the same thing for the section that the introductory section does for the chapter. Thus, in the arrangement of the various component parts one continues to move from the general to the particular. So it is in each subsection and within each paragraph.

b. The problem of the "A. General"—The introductory first subsection of an NIS section is probably the most difficult subsection to write. It is difficult because there is no clear-cut outline for it and there cannot be for the simple reason that each "A. General" must be tailored to fit the factors, trends, and developments peculiar to the country and to the subject of the section. It should represent the author's own understanding of the country in relation to the aspect of its life under discussion. The "A. General" is also difficult because it calls for a high level of generalization, and because it must provide the broad perspective needed to introduce diverse section subjects, such as manpower, political dynamics, and trade and finance.

Although it does not seem advisable for the NIS instructions to provide an outline for this subsection, it is recommended that in all cases the analyst prepare an outline before he begins to write. Probably a discussion of this outline with his branch chief or someone else experienced in NIS production (such as the branch supervisor or the NIS Coordinator) would be profitable. The outline might be compared with the structure and emphasis of several completed "A. Generals" on the same subject.

Experience has shown that ordinarily it is better to draft the "A. General" after the remainder of the section is completed. And incidentally, this is the type of writing which few can do well in one draft. In most cases it should represent two or three attempts based on the author's own critical appraisal and reappraisal. It has been said that most first drafts should be consigned to the wastebasket! It probably could be added that many second and third drafts should have a similar fate. (Except for the most talented writers, re-writing and revising should be considered normal procedure, not only for "A. Generals," but also for other parts of the text.)

c. Comments on principal sources—This last subsection of an NIS report is divided into two parts: 1) evaluation of sources and 2) list of principal sources. The first includes statements on the adequacy and reliability of the principal source material. It should also point out—and this is most often forgotten or done in a casual way—the principal gaps in the available information. Reviewers will be much less concerned about lack of information if the "Comments" show that the analyst recognized the gaps, presumably did what he could about them, and finally defined the shortcomings.

Lists of principal sources have frequently been too long. Emphasis should be on the word *principal*. Official U.S. reports, such as telegrams, despatches, and reports of various kinds are not ordinarily included in the list of principal sources. They may be mentioned, if especially important, in the textual evaluation of sources, and they may be referred to in the supplemental footnote references which are prepared for our own files and not for publication.

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5

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d. Incomplete sections—Completeness is discussed above, yet under “special problems” it seems necessary to refer to this again. An accurate table of contents should always accompany a manuscript. The proficient analyst will endeavor also to submit with his manuscript appropriate graphics, maps, photographs, and tables, with a figure list and a caption list, and all material supplementary to the text should be keyed in according to instructions. If a draft section is complete, the review can be handled much more expeditiously.

e. Headings—NIS has a special system of headings which is rigidly enforced. In the grade of headings and subheadings and in format no deviation is permitted. For the rules and examples, see the *Standard Instructions*, under the tab, Editorial Instructions, page 2 and insert on opposite page. Every analyst should by all means study the sample pages given. He may also consult printed sections. Since basically the NIS system is very simple, analysts can as easily follow it as any other, and to do so will save time for the editor, the analyst, and the typist.

### 3. Miscellaneous problems

#### a. Names

(1) Personal—Names of persons, when first mentioned, should be given in full, with title, if any. Thereafter a shorter form, usually (in Spanish) the primary surname, may be used. Spelling, if there is any doubt, should be checked against Section 59, if there is one. Care should be exercised to use accents as needed.

(2) Company—Names of companies should ordinarily be given in the language of the country and all foreign company names should be underscored. A translation should be given after the first mention of the name only if the name has special significance that would not be readily apparent to the reader.

(3) Organizational—Names of labor unions and federations, business and professional organizations, units of government, and similar associations or entities are customarily given in the English translation, followed in parentheses at the first mention by the native name and initials, if the latter are customarily used. Thereafter the initials of the foreign name may be used, especially if well known.

(4) Geographic—The Board on Geographic Names (BGN) requires in most cases the use of the foreign language form, such as Departamento de Tolima, though the form “in the department of Tolima” apparently is acceptable (note the small *d* in “department” which in this form is not a part of the proper name). A well-established English spelling can be used in a few instances (and is even required!) e.g., Havana. NIS gazetteers on each country list and give the correct spelling of all foreign geographic names.

b. Capitalization—As simple as the rules sounded in grammar school, this is a hard one! Correct capitalization like punctuation varies within fairly large limits. In NIS the use of capitals in optional cases is discouraged. For example, preferred usage seems to be about as follows: The *President* (of a country), the *Supreme Court*, the *Congress*, the *Senate*, but the *senators*, and *deputies* of the two houses of Congress, the *district courts*. Preferred also would be the *Cabinet*, but *cabinet ministers*; the *Minister of Agriculture*, but the *ministers of Government and of Agriculture*. In translating from Spanish, one should remember that Latin Americans use capitals much more freely than do U.S. writers. English usage should prevail, except in cases where the Spanish word itself is used.

c. Consistency, repetition, and cross-referencing—NIS places a high value on consistency. The analyst should not only make sure that his section is internally consistent, but he should also see that it is consistent with other sec-

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tions on the same country. The latter rule is qualified to the extent that later, or clearly more reliable, information may justify a factual change and/or a different emphasis. A note to this effect should be included.

NIS frowns upon repetition, especially those things which appear repetitious. Repetition, therefore, should be kept to a minimum consistent with the required development of the given topics and parts of an NIS. If some fact must be repeated, it should be put somewhat differently or introduced in such a way as to indicate that the writer appreciates the fact that the reader has seen this on some previous page. No section should repeat, verbatim, material in another section, and repetition of such information in any form is generally to be discouraged. Where the scope of one section seems to overlap with that of another, it is usually best to make a general suggestive summary statement and then cross-reference to the other section.

#### D. ADVANCE PLANNING AND POST-AUDIT

A complex research project requires careful planning in advance. This preparation should involve first of all a study of the requirements for the section being undertaken—not only a study of the *Standard Instructions* but also a study of several sections already completed on the same subject. This should be followed by 1) a brief study of the requirements of related other sections, and 2) a review of sections already completed on the country under study. Except possibly for the most experienced NIS writers, a few days spent in such study should pay handsome dividends. It should greatly assist the analyst in avoiding some of the pitfalls that now waste so much time.

Time could also be saved and a better section produced if an analyst, before he begins to write, would prepare an outline of his project and with that in hand consult with all appropriate office personnel. Meetings on the basis of such an outline have in the past proved useful. (An analyst may find it necessary to revise his outline as the job of writing progresses, but the writing should always proceed with reference to some outline, and when finished should be checked against an outline.)

An analyst should begin planning at an early date to request the appropriate embassy for information which cannot be procured in Washington. Much embarrassment and delay may result from failure to anticipate such needs. (If a trip to the country for on-the-spot research is in the budget the best time to go in most instances is when a draft is nearing completion.)

The production of supplementary materials, such as maps and graphics, should be planned so their completion coincides with the completion of the manuscript. It is primarily the responsibility of the analyst to see that this is done—it is an important part of producing a good NIS.

Finally, an analyst who is determined to produce a good NIS should never send forward a manuscript to any reviewing officer until he has read it with the greatest care. He should check it and recheck it, having in mind all the criteria that have been suggested above. An analyst should be his own severest critic! He cannot then be beholden (more than necessary) to any reviewing officer!

#### E. MAINTAINING A SCHEDULE

Recurrent production congestions at the end of each fiscal year, with a variety of repercussions, have shown the need for careful planning and persistent and determined efforts to maintain NIS schedules. Analysts should attempt to appraise realistically the job they have to do—1) when the schedule is being made (if they are available for consultation); 2) when the work is undertaken; and 3) from time to time as the work progresses. For one reason or another, almost all analysts underestimate the time that will be required to complete an

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7

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NIS section. The job looks easy! It is not. A period of several months seems like a long time! It is not—especially when there may be many interruptions. Intensity of effort and the continual rejection of non-essential jobs and distractions are essential to the completion of the task on time. When major, unanticipated work intervenes a postponement of the deadline may become inevitable. If such a change is necessary the record will look better if positive steps are taken to fix a new target date.

Obviously there is some conflict between writing an excellent NIS section and getting it done in accordance with the schedule. The suggestions made throughout this paper are designed to resolve this conflict. To finish off a quick draft and submit it for review only compounds the problem. It will take more time in the long run. It is only through careful planning, efficient execution, self-criticism, and a consistently disciplined approach, that both excellence in quality and conformity to schedules can be achieved.

In summary, there are three essentials to proper performance of NIS work: (1) thorough research, (2) finished presentation, and (3) maintenance of schedules. No two of these points are sufficient for excellence of performance. Without compliance with the first of these requirements, an adequate NIS cannot be completed; without compliance with the second, the analyst is passing on to others part of his responsibility; and without compliance with the third, the analyst is not performing in the long run his expected load of NIS production and is doing injury to the good name of the organization of which he is a member.